

Pilgrimage Through the Watchtower

Chapter 3:

Life in the "New World Society"



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Chapter 3: Life in the "New World Society"

Life as a Witness is by no means an easy one. Many long, self-sacrificing hours are spent each week in personal study, preparing for and attending meetings, delivering public talks at the Kingdom Hall, engaging in "field service," and studying with interested persons in their homes. In addition, circuit assemblies and district conventions are prepared for and attended three times each year.

Meetings

Jehovah's Witnesses attend five meetings each week: the public talk, the Watchtower study, the book study, the Theocratic Ministry School, and the Service Meeting.

The public talk is usually given on Sunday morning. It's given by one of the local congregation elders, or possibly by a visiting elder from a nearby congregation. If the circuit overseer is in town, he'll give the public talk.

The public talk is forty-five minutes long and is taken from an outline provided by the Watchtower Society. The talk usually revolves around a particular theme such as world conditions, Bible prophecy or Christian conduct.

The public talk is, as is every meeting, preceded and followed by congregational prayer and a "kingdom song" (I often played the piano accompaniment in Manitou Springs).

The public talk is followed immediately by the Watchtower study. At the Watchtower study, a "reader" reads the prescribed study article from the Watchtower magazine, paragraph by paragraph, the Watchtower study conductor asks the questions at the bottoms of the pages of the magazine, and the congregation members answer the questions. The Watchtower study articles are the main source of "spiritual food" for Jehovah's Witnesses. The weekly study article is usually relevant to a current subject or need in the organization, such as the exposition of Watchtower doctrine, application of Bible prophecy to current events, discussion of moral issues, etc. The study takes about an hour.

The book study, conducted in small groups in private homes, can be held at any time during the week, but is usually held on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday evening. The book study follows the same format as the Sunday morning Watchtower study, except that the study may be conducted by either a congregation elder or a ministerial servant (the Watchtower counterpart of the Christian deacon), and the subject material is taken from an assigned book rather than the Watchtower magazine. The book study takes an hour.

The Theocratic Ministry School meeting is conducted on a weeknight other than that of the book study, usually Thursday or Friday evening, and is held at the Kingdom Hall. At this meeting there is a series of five talks: the instruction talk, the Bible reading or #2 talk, the #3 talk, the #4 talk, and the #5 talk. The instruction talk is a fifteen-minute lecture given by one of the congregation elders or ministerial servants. The Bible reading is just that, a reading of a chapter or so from the New World Translation, usually done by a younger or newer member of the Ministry School. The #3 and #4 talks are each five minutes long and are usually discussions by two "sisters." The #5 talk is a five-minute talk based on a recent Watchtower or "Awake!" article, usually given by a moderately experienced speaker. After each of these talks a public critique of the student's presentation is given by the Ministry School overseer. Suggestions are given on areas that may need work including timing (timing seems to be of particular importance; the Ministry School overseer times each talk with a stopwatch), voice inflection, gestures, etc. The entire Ministry School meeting takes about an hour.

Once every three months the Theocratic Ministry School is preempted by the "written review." The written review is a written true-or-false, fill-in-the-blank, and multiple choice test covering the material studied in the Ministry School over the past several months. After the congregation has had 45 minutes or so to complete the review, the correct answers to the questions are given from the platform. Each student grades his own paper. No records are kept on the test scores.

As with virtually everything else in Witness life, personal testimony and expression have very little place in the Theocratic Ministry School. A personal example will illustrate this point:

As a relatively new student in the Ministry School at the Foothills congregation in Manitou Springs, Colorado, I was assigned a #5 talk. The "Awake!" article that I was to base my talk on was entitled, "Do All Religions Lead to God?" I made the mistake of incorporating some of my personal background, how I was involved with Eastern teachings

before coming into "the Truth," into my introduction. Though the congregation noticeably enjoyed my talk, one of the congregation elders pulled me aside after the meeting and "counseled" me on my introduction. He felt that relating my own personal experiences to the congregation was inappropriate. After this I was careful not to include such elements in my talks.

The Service Meeting follows immediately after the Theocratic Ministry School meeting. This meeting is to prepare the congregation members for their door-to-door "field service" activity. The Service Meeting has all the trappings of a corporate sales meeting. Articles in the monthly "Our Kingdom Ministry" newsletter are reviewed by the congregation to inculcate various witnessing methods, together with literature sales and distribution techniques. Special offers for the month are discussed. Sample presentations are given. Statistics as to the numbers of books and magazines sold, the numbers of hours spent in door-to-door activity and home Bible studies, and the number of new converts baptized are reviewed. Encouragement is given for all to participate in the field ministry on the coming weekend and during the following week.

"Field Service"

Door-to-door evangelism is not an elective for Jehovah's Witnesses. It's an obligation. The average Witness' reasoning on this is usually something like the following:

Matthew 24:14 (NWT) states, "And this good news of the kingdom will be preached in all the inhabited earth for a witness to all the nations; and then the end will come." 1 John 2:17 says, "the world is passing away and so is its desire, but he that does the will of God remains forever." Jehovah's Witnesses believe that they are fulfilling Matthew 24:14 by preaching their version of the "good news of the kingdom." This preaching is therefore the present-day will of God. Coupling this with 1 John 2:17, then, those who do not take part in the preaching work will pass away with the rest of the world at Armageddon. If a Witness hopes to survive Armageddon, he must preach. This is further "confirmed" by Ezekiel 3:18, where Jehovah says to Ezekiel, "When I say to someone wicked, 'You will positively die,' and you do not actually warn him and speak in order to warn the wicked one from his wicked way to preserve him alive, he being wicked, in this error he will die, but his blood I shall ask back from your own hand."

Each "field service" session is preceded by a 15-minute

"meeting for service," held either at the Kingdom Hall or at a private home. At this meeting, the "daily text" (a verse or two of Scripture with a short Watchtower Society comment from the current Yearbook) is discussed, "territory cards" (each congregation's "territory" is subdivided and printed on 3" x 5" "territory cards") are checked out, and logistical arrangements are made for the day's activities. Those present then divide into "car groups" and drive to their respective "territories."

On arriving at the territory, the car group divides into pairs of Witnesses for the door-to-door activity. Sometimes an experienced Witness will pair up with a less experienced Witness for training purposes, but this is not always the case. Family, relatives, and close friends will often pair up for the sake of comraderie. After the car group has paired off, the Witnesses, Bibles and Watchtower literature in hand, commence their "preaching" and "disciple-making work."

Each home or apartment is approached, and the "householder" is greeted and engaged in conversation, usually regarding present world conditions or some other topic of general interest. At some point in the conversation, God's millennial kingdom is presented by the Witness as the solution to the problem being discussed. To help the householder in learning more about Jehovah and his kingdom, an offer is made for the purchase of the Watchtower and Awake! magazines. If the householder purchases the literature or in some other way shows interest, arrangements are made for a "return visit" the following week. These "return visits" continue as long as the householder continues to show interest. Eventually, the householder is encouraged to accept a "free home Bible study." If he accepts, the Witness returns once each week to study a current Watchtower Society publication with him, one chapter per week. At the time of this writing, the book "You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth" is being used for this purpose. After a few weeks of study, when the time is right, the Witness asks the "interested person" if he would like to attend one of their meetings at the Kingdom Hall. The interested person often accepts the invitation, is soon attending all five meetings each week, and is encouraged to enroll in the "Theocratic Ministry School." Then, if he has been progressing well in his studies, he is prodded by his many new Witness friends to get baptized. He finally concedes, makes a personal commitment to Jehovah, and becomes a "baptismal candidate." He then meets with the elders of his congregation on three separate occasions to review the "80 questions for baptismal candidates" in the "Organized to Accomplish Our Ministry" book. Upon completion of these sessions, he is eligible for baptism. The baptism itself takes place either at a local private pool, or more often at an upcoming circuit or district convention of

Jehovah's Witnesses. Now baptized, the convert has completed his induction into the Watchtower society: from "householder" to "return visit" to "interested person" to "Bible study" to "baptismal candidate" to one of Jehovah's dedicated, baptized Witnesses!

A typical Witness puts in an average of seven to eight hours of "field service" per month. I personally put in from five to six hours per month, a little less than the national (U.S.) average. During the three and a half years that I spent as a bona fide, baptized Witness, however, I was never "irregular" in field service. I never let a month go by without sharing in the witnessing work.

Field service was at first terrifying and humiliating for me, but later on was often enjoyable. I personally loved the Bible, and thoroughly enjoyed any opportunities that I had to discuss it with others, rare as they might be. The vast majority of people, whether professedly Christian or not, were simply "not interested." A few misguided Christian people did "God bless" us and encourage us in our witnessing activity, though they still refused to discuss the Scriptures with us. I'm sure that if they had known our real purpose in calling, namely, to replace their orthodox Christian faith with the "good news of Jehovah's established (since 1914) kingdom," they would have been a bit more reserved in bestowing their blessings upon us! (Gal 1:8, 9)

Others that we met were more hostile. One day, for example, working in the Crystal Hills area of Manitou Springs with Dean, a middle-aged man, a retired army colonel, came to the door. He had an angry expression on his face and a large pair of scissors in his hand. "Are you Jehovah's Witnesses?" he asked me (it was "my door"). I answered, "Yes, we are." He said, "I have two questions for you. Will you salute the flag of the United States of America?" I answered, "No." He asked, "Will you bear arms and fight for your country?" I said, "No, but I'd like to explain..." He cut me off and sneered, "You have thirty seconds to get off my property!" Dean and I made haste back out to the street and continued on our way.

With all the apathy amongst the people in general, and with so much blind hatred and antagonism from others, you'd think that I'd remember at least one instance where I was greeted by a loving Christian who was eager to witness to me; share his testimony, debate the Scriptures, or whatever, but sadly, such was not the case. Christians, please hear me. *In the seven years that I spent going from door to door with a Bible in my hand, preaching what I believed to be the gospel, not once did a concerned Christian invite me in or even come outside* (if 2 John 10 bothered him) *to discuss the Scriptures with me.* Looking back, the most "Christian" response that I can

remember occurred while I was studying with the Witnesses in Potsdam, New York. Jim, a newly baptized Witness, and I were going from house to house. We approached one home where an older woman came to the door and asked, "Are you Jehovah's Witnesses?" We answered, "Yes." She said, "Oh, please come in!" so we did. "John," she said to her husband as she ushered us into the kitchen, "I think we should pray for these boys." Then she and her husband bowed their heads and began praying for us! But to our Watchtower minds, these "Babylonian religionists" were praying to their three-headed deity, and were probably calling demons down upon us! We had to get out of there fast! Leaving the woman and her husband in the kitchen praying, Jim and I made a dash across the living room and escaped out the front door.

Jehovah's Witnesses keep meticulous records of their door-to-door activities. "Time reports" are filled out every month by each active Witness. These reports detail the number of hours spent in field service each month, the numbers of books and magazines sold, and the number of "Bible studies" conducted. These reports are reviewed by the congregation elders and a "publisher's card", a sort of permanent report card, is kept on the "publisher," or individual Witness. The circuit overseer examines these publisher's cards and all other congregation records during his thrice-yearly visits. The publisher card follows the Witness wherever he goes. When I moved from Colorado back to New York in 1983, for example, my publisher card was sent also. The elders of my new congregation were then able to immediately judge my past door-to-door performance and to counsel me accordingly.

For me, as for the typical Witness, filling out the time report was a very unpleasant monthly ritual (Dotti, the "pioneer" sister and wife of the elder in Hyde Park who studied with me, once told me that she also hated it). Filling out the report always made me feel so guilty. I knew that I could have put in a few more hours that month if I had only tried a little harder. Though I evidently enjoyed reading and studying the Bible more than most Witnesses, the real praise and acclamation went to those who served sacrificially in the door-to-door work. The "pioneers" (who put in 90 hours of witnessing activity per month) and the "auxiliary pioneers" (60 hours per month) were routinely called up to the platform to be applauded by the rest of the congregation. I remember during one of these episodes turning to Dean, who was sitting next to me, and saying, "I feel like getting up and saying, 'Now let's hear it for the rest of us schlepps!'"

Another example will serve to show the importance placed upon field service hours. For several months I served regularly as a "reader" for the Watchtower study in Manitou

Springs. Quite a few members of the congregation let me know that they enjoyed my reading, and I personally enjoyed serving Jehovah in this small way. Then the elders of the congregation made a ruling that only those who consistently put in at least ten hours of "time" per month would be allowed to do the public reading. I was told that I could no longer do the reading until my "hours" were "brought up," and I was taken off the reading schedule.

The time-counting system bothered me also in several other ways. For one, I knew of several Witnesses, even some pioneers, who routinely "padded" their time in order to make their 60-hour or 90-hour quotas. "I'll make up the difference next month," they'd say. Also, there was a group in Manitou Springs who would "meet for service" at 9:00 a.m., get to the "field" at 9:30, go door-to-door for 45 minutes, and at 10:30 sharp congregate at the Manitou Coffee Shop for breakfast. Then they'd return to the "field" at 11:30 for a final half hour of Witnessing. This was reckoned by many of them as three hours of field service. From these and many other experiences I came to realize that not all Witnesses are genuinely interested in speaking to people about Jehovah. Not a few of them are simply "putting in time."

Assemblies

In addition to their five meetings per week, Jehovah's Witnesses also attend circuit assemblies twice each year and district conventions once each year.

Circuit assemblies are generally held in large auditoriums capable of seating from two to ten thousand people, and are attended by the twenty or so congregations that make up that particular "circuit." The circuit assemblies run for three days, in which the "circuit overseer" and other well-known speakers from the local area give talks from early morning to late afternoon, with a few "dramas" or skits interspersed to break up the tedium. A high point for me was being the featured piano accompanist for the Colorado Springs circuit assembly in the fall of 1982.

District conventions are usually held in larger convention halls or stadiums capable of seating from twenty to fifty thousand people, and are attended by the one hundred or more congregations that make up a "district." The district conventions run for four days and are similar to the circuit assemblies in format, with a few exceptions. Speakers at the district conventions, while drawn predominantly from the local area, often are members of the world headquarters staff in Brooklyn, New York, and sometimes even include

members of the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses. The high points of the district conventions for the attendees are the greatly anticipated "new releases" of Watchtower Society books, booklets, and cassette tapes. In prior years, things would often get out of hand as the many thousands of excited Witnesses swarmed the literature counters after the announcement of a new release. To alleviate this problem, new releases can no longer be purchased at the conventions, but must be purchased later at the local Kingdom Halls.

If this chronicling of Watchtower life is perhaps beginning to get a little tedious to the reader, be assured that it is often much, much more so for the Witness who is living it! In all my studying, attending meetings, preaching from door to door, conducting home "Bible" studies, filling out time reports, attending circuit assemblies and district conventions, etc., etc., I was never able to actually attain the peace of mind and the assurance of Jehovah's approval on my life that I so desperately sought. Jehovah's Witnesses have no assurance of salvation. But then, even during those very difficult years of working for "God's organization" and for my own salvation, seeds of hope and light were being sown in my heart.

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